"To promote Christian ideals for agriculture and rural life; to interpret the spiritual and religious values which inhere in the processes of agriculture and the relationships of rural life; to magnify and dignify the rural church; to provide a means of fellowship and cooperation among rural agencies: *Toward a Christian Rural Civilization.*"

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The Characteristics of a Christian Rural Community*

The Big Lick Community, Tennessee

By Eugene Smathers

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I

A Description of the Community

The Big Lick community is a small, remote, agricultural community of fifty-odd families, the majority of which own their own farms. It is located in the Cumberland Mountains of Tennessee. The land, while not originally fertile, responds to good soil practices and, with the addition of lime and phosphate, can be built up rapidly. Most of the families have carved their homesteads out of the wilderness at the cost of much hard labor and patient sacrifice. Even in 1940, the community is a little island in a sea of undeveloped land. This island must be enlarged considerably before the community is an efficient social and economic unit. The average cash income in 1939 was $230. This was supplemented by produce consumed by the family, valued at $180. The quality of the dwellings is very low. Cultural opportunities are few. The educational level is far from ideal.

Many of the community's major problems can be traced to this low economic level. One of these is the problem of health. In 1939, the average expense per family for very inadequate medical care was one-tenth of the average income. Many of the families could ill afford one visit from a doctor which costs from $10 to $15. A necessary period of hospitalization is a mortage on the family's future. Poor housing and sanitation complicate this problem. Another problem growing out of the economic situation is the loss of the best youth in times of prosperity or their disintegration in times of depression when the door of opportunity is closed both at home and elsewhere.

II

A. The Extent To Which The Community May Be Considered Christian and The Forces Which Have Contributed To Its Present Christian Character

From the very beginning the community has been touched by Christian influences. The pioneer families were definitely religious and their first community enterprise was the erection of a log church. But through the years

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*This paper was one of the prize-winning essays in the recent essay contest conducted by the Christian Rural Fellowship on the subject, "What Are the Characteristics of a Christian Rural Community?" Rev. Smathers, pastor of the Big Lick, Tennessee, parish since 1932, is a minister of the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A., and is serving under its Board of National Missions.

the original churches failed to meet the needs of the growing community. Some of the local leadership became dissatisfied with the existing church program and requested the Mission Board of a "foreign" denomination to assist in the establishment of a more adequate religious and community program. This request was granted by the appointment of a woman community worker who came to live among the people as a Christian neighbor for fifteen years. In 1921, the present church was organized and until 1934 was served by a non-resident pastor, who also served three other churches scattered over a large area. In 1934, this impossible field was divided and a resident pastor replaced the retiring community worker. And upon the firm Christian foundations established by years of devoted, sacrificial leadership, the pastor began to build.

Through the years the pioneer spirit of neighborliness and mutual helpfulness has been conserved and developed. This has been helped by the fact that there has never been any problem of tenancy or of class distinction. While there are religious differences, there has never been any serious religious division. There is real concern and practical helpfulness on the part of all in times of a neighbor's need. This is most evident in times of sickness, or in the case of land and house provided for an invalid and his family. This quality of neighborliness is stressed because it is an indication of its Christian quality and is an essential foundation upon which Christian community development may take place.

The present church, though a denominational church, seeks to be a community church and actually is the community center. The leaders of the church are in the main the leaders in every constructive community enterprise. The development of the present church has been made possible by the support of a Mission Board: first, in providing a resident community worker; then in providing a full-time resident pastor who loves country people and country things and is dedicated to, though not specially trained for, the rural ministry. The first task of the resident minister was to lead the people in building a House of Worship. For many years the only building available for religious and community uses had been the public school. With the financial assistance of an interested Christian of means, the community built, by its own labor, an attractive little stone church, well adapted to local needs. The experience in working together to secure this addition to the community and the opportunities which such a building provided have contributed much toward the further development of the Christian quality of the community.

There has been a growing recognition of the problems of the community and of the responsibility of the Christian fellowship in seeking a solution to every problem which is not being attacked by other agencies. This has led to the development of various community enterprises and activities, motivated and directed by the Christian spirit, until every aspect of its life is touched to a greater or lesser degree by Christian influences. Recognizing the right and need of youth for wholesome play, one of the earliest efforts was toward a constructive program of recreation. In the face of considerable prejudice and opposition, this program has moved forward, bringing much wholesome joy into dull and drab surroundings. The chief dependence has been upon folk games, supplemented by traditional games, athletics, a playground for the children. A play pavilion is in process of construction. It has been discovered that the most joyful and creative fun can be of one's own making, that

Many of the environmental factors still remain at a non-Christian level. A better life for many of the families will be possible only when their incomes are more adequate, thus making available better medical care, better housing, less sheer drudgery and better educational and cultural opportunities. Much can be done to improve these factors locally, but there will still remain much that is dependent upon the improvement of county, state and national policies regarding agricultural communities. And as the isolation of the community increasingly disappears, there is the encroachment of commercialized forces of evil. But the basic problem of this community is and will continue to be man himself, his own interior contradictions and selfishness.

III

The Characteristics of An Ideal Christian Community

The ideal Christian community will be characterized by love in all its manifold relationships: love of God, love of man, love of soil. The spirit of neighborliness and cooperation will be manifest in every aspect of its life. Each individual and family will in so far as possible carry its own load, but also be willing to help bear the burdens of those less fortunate. Each will seek the welfare of all, and all will seek the welfare of each. There will be a sense of the dignity of rural life and an appreciation of its opportunity to provide the foundation of a good life in partnership with God. There will be a sense of the interrelatedness of all living things. High standards of honesty, integrity, thrift, kindness and service will prevail.

This ideal community must have the physical resources of soil, rainfall and climate which will sustain its families. The population will be large enough to make it an efficient social and economic unit. The farms will be owner-operated, either individually or cooperatively. The best farming practices will be used, recognizing them as the laws of God. There will be voluntary stewardship of the soil and other natural resources. The cooperation of every agency, private and governmental, will be enlisted for the protection and development of these basic resources.

The law of love will find expression through cooperation in all areas of the community's life. Cooperation in study through the use of the study club technique. Cooperation in finance through a credit union. Cooperation in buying and selling through consumer and producer cooperatives. Cooperation for health through a medical cooperative. And every other need of the community that can be met by voluntary group action will be met by the application of these same democratic and Christian principles. A creative and wholesome program of recreation will be provided for all ages, varied enough to satisfy individual needs. There will be a continuing program of community beautification.

Adequate educational opportunity for every child and youth will be provided. And this education will instill a love for the country and prepare for effective living amid country things. It will also broaden the horizon of youth and help them become efficient Christian citizens of the larger human community.

several ways. It seeks to contribute to the solution of the economic problem, to the problem of youth migration and community stability, also to the establishment of secure Christian homes. This is a homestead plan which purposes to make farm-sized tracts of land available to young men by purchasing, subdividing and reselling on a long-term payment plan, at a low rate of interest, some of the undeveloped lands adjacent to the present community. This will provide an economic opportunity for some of the better youth, thus conserving their abilities and energies for the future development of the community. This opportunity to establish new families on the land will help increase the population of the community and thus make it a more adequate social unit and also contribute to its stability. This will also make possible an extension of the cooperative idea and practice. Already some of the young men are working on a plan for a cooperative farm.

The basic purpose of all of these efforts is to protect the three fundamental elements in rural community life: the land, the family and the individual. There is a continuous effort to build Christian homes and to assist them in their essential task. This effort includes education in Christian family life for both young people and parents. A monthly church paper seeks to tie family, church and community together in a creative Christian task. Out of Christian homes come the persons who carry the community enterprises and give the community its Christian quality.

B. The Extent To Which The Community May Not Be Considered Christian and The Forces Which Are Responsible For Its Non-Christian Character

In contrast to the factors which have contributed to the Christian quality of this community, there are other factors which clearly indicate how far it is from being an ideal Christian community. Many of these factors, and the most stubborn, are in the realm of attitudes: defeatism, self-satisfaction and satisfaction with present conditions, an individualism which hinders or prevents cooperation, a tenacity of tradition and custom, and a sort of "know-it-allness" that discredits the aid of experts and resists new ideas. A sentimental religion divorced from life is adhered to by many. Many of the professing Christians can see no relationship between their religion and health, or play, or economic improvement. Accepting the present situation as the will of God, the primary aim is to get to heaven and avoid hell. Such religion finds its expression, not in a way of life, but in an annual emotional spree at the revival. Tremendous power is generated but is hitched to no constructive end. And the requirements of such a religion are very light. The Cross becomes wholly something done for us and not also a way of life. The ease of this religion makes distasteful a religion of demands. This other-worldly conception of religion is largely responsible for many other factors which hinder the development of a Christian community.

Not all of the professing Christian families are active in the church. Too large a proportion of the parents have little concern for the Christian training of children and youth. Too many willingly accept whatever the church has to contribute to the community without any sense of their responsibility to share in the church and community program. Even in the task of better health and a higher economic level, there is not full cooperation. In fact, those who would benefit the most from mutual aid and cooperation are the least cooperative.

even folk of low incomes can provide their own recreational opportunity without paying tribute to commercial amusements. Play, in its most inclusive sense, will always have an important place in the life of this community.

This obligation to bring the Gospel of Christ to bear upon all areas of life has led the community to attack the problem of health and medical care. A medical cooperative being impossible because of the small number of families, their isolation and low incomes, it was decided that the best contribution to the health of the community under the circumstances could be made by a resident nurse and a program of education and prevention. As the community was not even in a position to support a nurse, the tragic situation was presented to the Mission Board which made a grant for the health program. There was need for a home for the nurse and for a center for the new enterprise. With the financial assistance of the friend who had helped with the construction of the church, the community built a beautiful and well-equipped House of Health. Here two regular clinics are held each month: a mother-and-baby clinic and a general medical clinic. Classes in child care, home hygiene and first aid are held. From the center, the nurse goes into the homes with nursing care and health teaching. There are beds for emergency cases. An attempt to settle a refugee doctor was prevented by an adverse ruling of the State Board of Medical Examiners. While the present program is far from adequate, it does render a valuable service. As the community grows in numbers and resources, there is hope of some sort of medical cooperative which will more adequately meet the situation.

Recognizing that many elements of the good life are dependent upon a higher standard of living, upon more adequate incomes, there has been a determined effort to lift the economic level of the community. Two things were seen to be essential at this point: education in better farming practices and cooperation. Various educational efforts had been made with the help of the agricultural extension service and other agencies. But not a great deal had been accomplished. Then the study club technique of adult education, used so successfully in Nova Scotia, was adopted. A study club is "voluntary gathering together of congenial neighbors who, because of the urgency of common needs, study to find a better way. The group chooses and develops its own leadership, hammers new ideas into convictions on the anvil of experience, and puts its best judgments into action in its own program for personal, home and community development." Even a brief experience with this simple method has led to several practical results. A farmers' association has been formed for the immediate purpose of securing cooperatively certain items of farm machinery which no individual farmer could afford to own, yet which all needed. A cooperative stock-dipping vat is under construction. Fertilizer ingredients were secured by group purchase and mixed at home. Purebred sires have been secured. A community tractor, sawmill and hammer mill are operated by the association. While these enterprises have only scratched the surface of the economic problem, the sense of accomplishment that has gone with them has given the participants a feeling of their ability to do something about their problems and is an earnest of greater things, if and when they become increasingly able to work together in an unselfish and cooperative spirit.

Another enterprise sponsored by the church and the Board of Missions purposes to make contributions to the Christian quality of the community in

Every enterprise will have as its purpose the strengthening of family life and aiding the home in its basic Christian task. Each family will own its own farm, large enough to sustain the family, with decent house. The homes will be simple, yet convenient, healthful and beautiful. They will have books, pictures and music. Many of the furnishings will be the products of the family's own labor and skill. In these homes children and youth will learn the art of Christian living, not so much by word of mouth as by daily practice of the law of love in all the family relationships. Each home will be a small cooperative society.

At the center of the ideal community will be one strong church, inclusive enough in its spirit to be the spiritual home of every shade of opinion, and in reality a fellowship of love, bringing the rule of God's love to bear upon the whole man and upon every aspect of community life. Its redemptive ministry will reach into every home and into every relationship of life. The church will be the unifying center, binding together under the dominance of the Christian philosophy of life all the institutions, organizations and citizens. The pastor will be dedicated to the rural ministry and especially trained for his task, and in all things he will give preeminence to Christ.

IV

The Extent To Which The Christian Characteristics May Be Reproducible in Other Communities

All of the factors which have been indicated as making a contribution to the Christian quality of this community can be readily reproduced in other rural communities. The study club and the cooperative are simple and effective techniques by which the Christian spirit may find practical application in many areas of community life. What this community has been able to do in the way of providing buildings and physical equipment, with the aid of some outside finances, can be accomplished altogether by a community with larger local resources. A few determined and devoted Christians with vision and patience can accomplish much toward making their community more Christian. This is more readily done with a resident pastor who is rural-minded and trained for his task, and who remains with his people long enough to carry through a comprehensive program of community building. Nor can Christian community building take place under the leadership of a pastor who is always looking for the "more fruitful fields" in the city or who comes to the country to spend his declining years.

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